

Relative deprivation, national GDP and right-wing populism: A multilevel, multinational study

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Abstract

We conducted a secondary analysis of the 2018 (ninth round) European Social Survey dataset ($N = 19,512$, nested in 24 countries) to analyse the association between relative deprivation and right-wing populist voting, moderated by participants' income and their country's GDP. A multilevel moderated model showed that relative deprivation, income and GDP had no association with right-wing populist votes by themselves. However, income and GDP moderated the relation between relative deprivation and right-wing populist votes, that was significant for participants with high incomes and for those living in wealthy countries. The strengths, limitations and future developments of the study are discussed.

KEYWORDS

GDP, multilevel analysis, relative deprivation, right-wing populism, social status

1 | INTRODUCTION

"Many citizens feel as if they are waiting longer and longer in a line for something that they deserve, while undeserving people cut in and are allowed to do so, unfairly slowing the line's progress" (Arlie Russel Hochschild).

The spectacular rise of populism in many Western countries in recent decades reflects a conspicuous demand for protection at various levels (social, economic, cultural...), a demand that finds no answers in traditional political parties (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The core elements of populism are a sharp and morally

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connoted division of society into two homogeneous groups, the good People versus the corrupt and self-serving Elite (Mudde, 2004, 2007), and the need for good politics to be the direct expression of the general will of the people.

Populism is a “thin-centred ideology” because it must combine with a stronger “host ideology” to hold its own (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Researchers have identified a right-wing populism, a left-wing populism and a valence populism (Zulianello, 2019). The first, often associated with some forms of ethno-nationalism, is characterized by authoritarianism, nativism, opposition to immigration and charismatic leadership (e.g. the “Rassemblement National” in France and the “Freedom Party” in Austria). The second is characterized by strong opposition to the political and economic establishment and a focus on egalitarian redistribution of resources in society (e.g. “Podemos” in Spain and “Syriza” in Greece). The third is characterized by a post-ideological or non-ideological orientation that rejects left and right as categories for interpreting political space, and focuses on transversal political issues such as education and the fight against political corruption (e.g. the “Movimento 5 Stelle” in Italy and “ANO 2011” in Czech Republic).

In this study, we focus on right-wing populism because it is considered the most dangerous to existing democracies and is also the most widespread (Urbanska & Guimond, 2018). It is considered worrisome because it builds on a vision of society based on radical division and opposition between social groups (Gidron & Hall, 2017), on diminished social cohesion and on an interpretation of inequality that does not really address the problem itself, but rather reinforces perceptions of threat and reduces support for economic redistribution (Jay, Batruch, Jetten, McGarty, & Muldoon, 2019).

Many studies suggest that economic decline can provide fertile ground for right-wing populism, especially when combined with sociodemographic, political and psychological variables such as high age, low education, unemployment, political distrust, negative attitude towards immigration and racial prejudice (Stockemer, Lentz, & Mayer, 2018). However, this link is not clear-cut. In fact, there is growing evidence that the popularity of populist parties can increase even during periods of economic prosperity (Mols & Jetten, 2016). For example, in a multilevel study of several European countries, Lubbers, Gijssberts, and Scheepers (2002) found that support for right-wing populist parties is higher in relatively affluent European regions and that right-wing populist parties can attract large numbers of middle-class voters. More recently, some authors have emphasized the importance of intergroup dynamics, social identity and subjective perceptions of economic and cultural processes in bringing people to the populist side (Hameleers et al., 2021; Obradovic, Power, & Sheehy-Skeffington, 2020; Oxendine, 2019). Within a social psychological framework, the dynamics of social comparison (Festinger, 1954) and relative deprivation seem particularly promising for the study of right-wing populism.

2 | RELATIVE DEPRIVATION AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Relative deprivation is the perception that one is unfairly worse off compared to some relevant standard (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). People feeling relatively deprived believe that they are victims of a disproportionate distribution of social, cultural and economic resources compared to a salient and important referent, and this triggers feelings of anger and resentment (Cena, 2021). Relative deprivation reinforces subjective perceptions of economic vulnerability and leads to strategies aimed at reducing perceptions of injustice and disadvantage, such as voting for a populist party (Spruyt, Keppens, & Van Droogenbroeck, 2016). Because people who feel relatively deprived are particularly likely to unfavourable social comparisons (e.g. between the ‘People’ and the ‘Elite’), they may be particularly susceptible to the core ideology of populism (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016) and to populist discourse that systematically frames problems in terms of relative disadvantage (Mols & Jetten, 2016).

In line with this idea, Hameleers (2019) showed that messages about relative deprivation are crucial in populist communication. Moreover, other scholars explored the possibility that perceptions of relative deprivation are stronger predictor of populist votes than mere economic situation. Gidron and Hall (2017) showed that a decline in subjective social status led to support for right-wing populist parties. Similarly, Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou,

Castellanos, and Batayneh (2017) found that perceptions of the relative disadvantage of one's group led to a higher propensity to hold populist views, reflected in support for Brexit. They also found that the perception of the ingroup's relative deprivation had a significant positive effect on voting for Trump over Clinton. Furthermore, an empirical study in Poland found that feelings of relative deprivation were associated with support for the right-wing populist "Law and Justice" party (Winiewski, Jurczynszyn, Bilewicz, & Beneda, 2015). Similar findings are reported in Italy, where survey data revealed a positive relationship between feelings of relative deprivation and populist orientation and vote choices (Cena, Cavazza, & Rocco, 2022). Overall, these studies suggest that relative deprivation plays a key role in explaining approval of populist ideologies and parties.

3 | THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL INCOME AND COUNTRY GDP

Survey research has shown that in recent years, the popularity of right-wing populist parties has increased in high-income countries (Lubbers, Gijssberts, & Scheepers, 2002). An experiment by Mols and Jetten (2016) confirmed that right-wing populist parties can thrive in times of economic prosperity. After manipulating perceptions of the country's future economic performance, they asked participants to rate an anti-immigrant speech and found that anti-immigrant sentiment was higher when participants expected economic prosperity rather than decline. They also qualitatively analysed the speeches of Australian and Dutch right-wing populist leaders who achieved significant electoral success during periods of relative prosperity. They found that populist leaders can transform objective relative satisfaction into perceived relative deprivation, promoting a sense of injustice by portraying ordinary citizens as threatened by outsiders, thereby inducing status anxiety among voters. These findings suggest that it is also important to consider the positive contextual features that may foster the rise of right-wing populist parties, considering a "Wealth paradox" that contradicts common knowledge (Jetten, 2019).

Although numerous studies have directly examined the effects of aggregate-level variables on right-wing populist voting (e.g. Ferrari, 2021; Hartmann, Kurz, & Lengfeld, 2021), very little is known about how these contextual characteristics interact with individuals' relative deprivation in predicting populist votes. An interesting attempt is made by Rooduijn and Burgoon (2018). They propose and successfully test, using 7 waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) data, from 2002 to 2014, a "dampening hypothesis" according to which the negative effect of individual economic well-being on radical voting should increase under favourable conditions. These authors suggest that more favourable macroeconomic conditions (such as low unemployment or higher social welfare expenditure) may increase the likelihood that voters will make unfavourable comparisons, leading to a greater sense of relative deprivation. At the same time, favourable conditions may allow voters to back untested anti-establishment parties. This process remains a speculation, however, as Rooduijn and Burgoon did not test it directly, but worked with subjective perceptions of household income rather than an actual indicator of relative deprivation. Indeed, according to the authors themselves, the independent variable they used, that is, "Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays? Living comfortably on present income (= 1), Coping on present income (= 2), Finding it difficult on present income (3) and Finding it very difficult on present income (= 4)" measures economic well-being and not relative deprivation. In fact, no relative deprivation items were available in the data sets they have used. In this study, we analyse directly the relationship between relative deprivation and right-wing populist vote choices. Unlike Rooduijn and Burgoon (2018), we use the 2018 ESS survey, where a direct indicator of relative deprivation is available (see below). Moreover, we focus specifically on right-wing populist parties. Our goal is to analyse how the relationship between feelings of relative deprivation and voting for a right-wing populist party may change as a function of economic conditions at both the individual- and country-level. Specifically, we expect individual relative deprivation to be positively related to voting for a right-wing populist party (H1), and national GDP (H2a) and individual income (H2b) to moderate this relationship and strengthen the link between relative deprivation and voting for a right-wing populist party.

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Data and sample

We tested our hypotheses using data from the ESS, Round 9, 2018 (<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/multilevel/>). The data are collected through online interviews from representative samples of European citizens aged 15 and older. The original dataset contained information for 49,519 respondents nested in 29 countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia and Switzerland).

4.2 | Measures

4.2.1 | Right-wing populist vote

Using the categorization of “The PopuList” (<https://popu-list.org/>), we contrasted right-wing populist votes against all other votes. We obtained valid responses for 28,452 respondents (all respondents who did not indicate their vote were excluded from the analyses). We also excluded respondents from Cipro ($n = 291$), Serbia ($n = 931$), Montenegro ($n = 646$), Portugal ($n = 577$) and Ireland ($n = 1255$), as there were no right-wing populist parties in these countries. The final value is dichotomous and is coded as 1 “vote for a right-wing populist party” and 0 “valid vote for other parties”.

4.2.2 | Relative deprivation

We used the following item to assess relative deprivation: “Compared to other people in [country], I would have a fair chance of getting the job I was seeking”, with answers ranging from ‘0’ “does not apply at all” to “10” “applies completely”. Responses were recoded so that higher scores indicated relative deprivation. We have chosen this item since it touches all three steps of the relative deprivation process defined by Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, and Bialosiewicz (2012), that is: (a) the need for an individual to make a social comparison (elicited by the first part of the item), (b) the cognitive appraisal of an imbalance of some valued resources (in this case obtaining the desired job) and (c) the perception of the disadvantage must be viewed in terms of injustice (this aspect is granted by the “fairness” recalled by the item).

4.2.3 | Income

Respondents were asked to describe, with reference to the deciles, their household's total income after taxes and compulsory deductions, considering all sources of income. Higher scores indicate higher income.

4.2.4 | Control variables

Like previously done by Rooduijn and Burgoon (2018), we controlled for gender (1 = male), age, years of full-time education completed, unemployment (1 = unemployed), religiosity (ranging from 0 = “not at all religious” to 10 = “very religious”), urban/rural area of residence (1 = urban), satisfaction with the present state of the

economy and with the government (two items ranging from 0 = “extremely dissatisfied” to 10 = “extremely satisfied”), left–right political placement (ranging from 0 = left to 10 = right), anti-immigration attitude (as the mean of the following 11-category items, with higher scores indicating an anti-immigration attitude: “Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]’s economy that people come to live here from other countries?”, “Would you say that [country]’s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?” and ‘Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries’, $\alpha = .88$), support for redistribution (measured using the following item: ‘The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels, with response categories ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”’) and trust in politics (computed as the mean of participants’ trust in parliament and politicians, measured using two 11-category variables, ranging from 0 = no trust at all to 10 = complete trust, $\alpha = .85$).

4.2.5 | Country-level variable

We used Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as registered in 2017. GDP is a per capita value, that is, calculated as the aggregate of production (GDP) divided by population, at current prices of the reporting period, in US dollars. We rescaled the variable by dividing it by 1000 to facilitate the computation of the models. Data for all countries except Serbia were available from the United Nations Statistics Division (<https://unstats.un.org/home/>).

Our final sample, comprising respondents with valid answers to all variables, consisted of 19,512 participants (49.5% men, $M_{\text{age}} = 53.54$, $SD = 16.82$), nested in 24 countries. Descriptive statistics and correlations can be found in Table 1.

4.3 | Analytical strategy

We used a multilevel approach to test for individual- and country-level effects and for cross-level interactions. We followed the procedure of Sommet and Morselli (2017) to test multilevel effects for dichotomous-dependent variables. In a first step, we built an unconditional model to assess the variation in the log-odds of voting for a right-wing populist party from one country to another. In the second step, we compared two intermediate models to assess the variation in the individual-level effect of relative deprivation on the voting decision from one country to another. The first intermediate model, that is, the Constrained Intermediate Model (CIM), includes all individual-level variables (gender, age, education, unemployment, religiosity, urban/rural domicile, satisfaction with economy, satisfaction with the government, left/right, anti-immigration attitude, support for redistribution, political trust, relative deprivation and income), the country-level variable (GDP), and the interaction between relative deprivation and household income. In the second intermediate model, that is, the Augmented Intermediate Model (AIM), we included the residual term associated with the relative deprivation variable and thus estimated its random slope variance. We compared the deviance of the latter two models and performed a likelihood-ratio test (see Equation 9 in Sommet & Morselli, 2017): if the deviance of the AIM is significantly smaller than the deviance of the CIM, the residual term should remain in the model, because allowing the effect of relative deprivation to vary across countries improves the fit of the model. In the third step, we built a final model to test the cross-level hypothesis regarding the interaction between relative deprivation and countries’ GDP. GDP was centred at the grand mean, while the continuous variables at the individual level were group-centred. In the final model, again following Sommet and Morselli (2017), we interpret the main effects by looking at the odd ratios and their 95% confidence intervals, which indicate a significant effect (with $p < .05$) when they do not contain 1.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables

	Range		M	SD	Correlations									
	Min	Max			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Individual level (N = 19,512)														
1. Gender	0	1	49.50%		-.01	-.01	-.02*	-.15***	-.03***	.10***	-.07***	.11***	.04***	
2. Age	15	90	53.54	16.82	-	-.26***	-.10***	.21***	-.05***	-.04***	.24***	-.27***	.01	
3. Education	0	60	13.83	4.20	-	-	-.03***	-.12***	.17***	.10***	-.27***	.32***	-.15***	
4. Unemployed	0	1	3.70%		-	-	-	.02*	-.01	-.11***	.10***	-.12***	.01	
5. Religiosity	0	10	4.26	3.09	-	-	-	-	-.08***	-.02**	.11***	-.12***	.03***	
6. Urban/rural domicile	0	1	63.00%		-	-	-	-	-	.01	-.06***	.04***	-.05***	
7. Satisfaction with economy	0	10	5.80	2.31	-	-	-	-	-	-.32***	.20***	-.07***	-.07***	
8. Relative deprivation	0	10	3.57	2.84	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.28***	.08***	
9. Income	1	10	5.71	2.74	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.07***	
10. Vote for a populist right-wing party	0	1	16.70%		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Country level (N = 24)														
GDP	8.30	83.31	37.78	19.11										

Note: We report figures for gender (% males), unemployment (% unemployed), urban/rural domicile (% urban), and populism (% votes for populist right-wing parties). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

4.4 | Results

Step 1 showed that votes for right-wing populist parties vary significantly across countries (variance = 1.12, $p < .001$), with an ICC of .254, implying that 25% of the probability of voting for a populist party is explained by differences across countries. In Step 2, the comparison between the deviances of the CIM and the AIM models showed that it is better to consider the variability of the slope of relative deprivation, LR $\chi^2(1) = 9.232$, $p < .001$. In Step 3, we added the cross-level interaction between relative deprivation and GDP. Table 2 shows the results of this last step. Men, young people, less educated and unemployed respondents are more likely to vote for a right-wing populist party. Moreover, the probability of voting for a right-wing populist party shows a positive association with right-wing political placing and anti-immigration attitudes and a negative association with political trust. Although the direct effects of relative deprivation, income and GDP did not reach the conventional significance threshold, the effect of relative deprivation was significantly moderated by income and GDP, as indicated by the two significant interactions.

Following Sommet and Morselli (2017), we decomposed the interaction term to estimate the effect of relative deprivation for each level of the country GDP using two dummy-coded models. The first estimates the effect of relative deprivation in countries with low GDP (1 SD below the grand mean) and shows that the effect is not significant (coeff. = $-.02$, $p = .165$, OR = 0.98, 95% CIs: 0.96–1.00). The second estimates the effect of relative deprivation in countries with high GDP (1 SD above the grand mean) and shows that the effect is positive and significant

TABLE 2 Multilevel logistic regression predicting the chance of voting for a right-wing populist party

	Logit estimates	SE	Odds ratios	95% CIs
Individual-level predictors				
Gender	.24***	.08	1.28	1.04–1.57
Age	-.01**	.00	.99	.98–1.00
Education	-.05***	.01	.95	.93–.97
Unemployment	-.31*	.13	.93	.53–1.01
Religiosity	-.01	.02	.99	.95–1.03
Urban/rural	-.02	.08	.97	.79–1.20
Satisfaction with economy	-.00	.00	1.00	.99–1.01
Satisfaction with the government	.02	.06	1.02	.88–1.18
Left/right	.35***	.06	1.42	1.22–1.66
Anti-immigration	.27***	.04	1.31	1.19–1.44
Support for redistribution	.03	.04	1.03	.94–1.13
Political trust	-.11***	.02	.90	.85–.96
Relative deprivation	.00	.01	1.00	.93–1.03
Income	-.04	.01	.96	.93–.99
Relative deprivation * income	.01**	.00	1.01	1.00–1.01
Country-level predictors				
GDP	-.02^	.01	.98	0.95–1.01
Random effects				
Relative deprivation * GDP	.00***	.00	1.00	1.00–1.00
N individuals	19,512			
N countries	24			

Note: ^ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

(coeff. = .03, $p = .007$, OR = 1.03, 95% CIs: 1.01–1.06). Similarly, we conducted a simple slope analysis to describe the interaction between relative deprivation and income. We found that the effect of relative deprivation was positive and significant (coeff. = .02, $p = .038$, OR = 1.02, 95% CIs: 1.01–1.04) for people with high income (1 *SD* above the mean), whereas it was not significant (coeff. = $-.01$, $p = .330$, OR = 0.98, 95% CIs: 0.96–1.01) for low income individuals (-1 *SD* below the mean).

5 | DISCUSSION

Globalization has led to rapid and dramatic social, economic and political changes in Western societies. These changes have caused psychological insecurities and frustrations, especially among people who feel deprived of what they believe they deserve (Pettigrew, 2017). In line with the idea that this sense of relative deprivation can lead people to blame other people or groups for their discomfort and help them find a convenient scapegoat in the political elite (Bos et al., 2020), in this study, we analysed the relationship between relative deprivation and the propensity to vote for right-wing populist parties. In line with Lewin's (1936) classic idea that the expression of social-psychological variables depends on their interaction with people's objective situation and with common environmental stimuli, we focused on the moderator role played by participants' income and their countries' GDP. Our results showed that all these variables are not significantly associated with right-wing populist votes. Their interactions, however, are: relative deprivation was positively associated with right-wing populist votes among people with high incomes and among people living in affluent countries.

These findings are important for the literature on right-wing populism in two ways. First, because they help to complement the social psychological approach to populism, according to which people's perceptions of their situation are the main basis of populism. For example, Roccato, Cavazza, Colloca, and Russo (2020) have recently shown that populist orientations and votes are fostered by perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat and dissatisfaction with representative democracy. However, these authors did not test the moderating role of individual and contextual status variables. This study is undoubtedly a step forward because it demonstrates the need to paint a more complete picture of the origins of right-wing populism. Second, the findings provide empirical support for Rooduijn and Burgoon's (2018) interpretation of why right-wing populist parties can flourish among citizens of affluent countries and among wealthy people (Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Mols & Jetten, 2016) and show the relevance of their increased chances of making adverse comparisons. One could argue that these individuals may be motivated by the fear and anxiety arising from the risk of losing advantageous social status to other groups, a proposition also referred to as "relative gratification" (Grofman & Muller, 1973). Accordingly, feelings of relative deprivation might be more pronounced among those who are relatively wealthier and therefore experience relative gratification. Indeed, Guimond and Dambrun (2002) found that people who felt that their group's status was improving expressed as much, if not more, intergroup hostility than those who felt that their group's position was deteriorating. It is plausible that similar social psychological processes, status anxiety, and "fear of falling behind" triggered by relative affluence, also apply to support for right-wing populist parties. A direct test of this interpretation could be interesting.

More generally, our findings highlight the importance of taking a multilevel approach to predicting right-wing populism, considering individual and social variables and their interactions. As is so often the case in this area of research (e.g. Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018), we used data nested at the country level. This was a forced choice due to the secondary analysis approach we resorted to. However, our multilevel approach did not allow us to test causal links between our independent and our dependent variables. An experimental replication of this study could be interesting. Moreover, we do not know whether the results we obtained would hold for contextual moderators measured at a subnational level. Repeating this study using data nested in narrower contexts (e.g. subnational geopolitical areas) might be interesting. In addition, the measure of relative deprivation that we were able to use was in part sub-optimal, as it consisted of a single item and referred only to the work dimension. The methodological literature shows

that when measuring a concrete construct (as in this case), results from single items and from scales tend to converge and have analogous test–retest reliabilities (Rossiter, 2002; Zimmerman et al., 2006). According to Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007), single items are even better than scales when interviewing samples from the general population because they minimize refusals and response sets. However, the exclusive reference to the work dimension is undoubtedly a limitation of our relative deprivation item. Future research based on more articulated measures, such as the 4-item “Personal Relative Deprivation Scale” (PRDS, Callan, Ellard, Shead, & Hodgins, 2008), may be of interest. In addition, no mediators of the relative deprivation–right-wing populist vote were available in our dataset. Collective narcissism (the belief that others do not sufficiently appreciate the ingroup’s exaggerated greatness), anxiety, anger, and resentment showed interesting links to the constructs we analysed (e.g. de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009; Smith & Pettigrew, 2014). However, their role has never been tested in multilevel models of right-wing populist vote prediction. A replication of this research using these variables as moderators of relative deprivation–right-wing populism might be interesting.

To conclude our reasoning, we can truly say that we are working with a “paradox” as Jetten (2019) highlighted, that requires to understand the effects and interactions between the perception of relative deprivation and economic factors at the individual and the contextual level and. The idea, already present in the literature, that individual-level absolute deprivation can increase support for right-wing populism (e.g. Ferrari, 2021) needs to be reread in the light of relative deprivation theory and we need to consider that this connection is deeply influenced by micro- and macro-level economic factors. Our results show that these variables are not significantly associated with support for right-wing populism. But at the same time, and here lies the paradox, there is evidence that right-wing populist parties can increase their popularity even during periods of macro-level economic prosperity (Mols & Jetten, 2016). Now the “Wealth paradox” (Jetten, 2019) components are falling into place, since individual income interacts with perception of relative deprivation and with national GDP, and the interactions end up in a positive effect overall on right-wing populist vote.

Finally, Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck (2016) conceptualized support for populist parties as a coping strategy that enables people who feel that they have lost out in modernization to develop a positive social identity. In line with this, an interesting further development of this study could be to analyse whether switching to a populist vote actually increases people’s well-being. We believe that even before these studies were conducted, this study contributed significantly to understanding the reasons why right-wing populist parties flourish in affluent contexts.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in European Social Survey at <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/multilevel/>. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: - European Social Survey, <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/multilevel/>

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